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INFO RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 8533  
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: UAVS -- "EYES IN THE SKY" FOR COLMIL OPERATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood  
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (S) Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are a low-tech, low-cost, and low-risk but potentially high-impact new addition to USG-GOC intelligence cooperation in support of counterterrorism and counterdrug efforts. Since their arrival in July, a test package of UAVs has provided valuable, real-time aerial video reconnaissance and surveillance to live COLMIL operations. The UAV program's principal priorities are to support U.S. hostage rescue efforts and to assist COLMIL pursuit of FARC leaders, but it promises to be equally useful for combat against terrorists and in riverine drug interdiction. As with all intelligence capabilities, what matters most is its aggressive application by the COLMIL in offensive action. End Summary.

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Remote Control Aerial Surveillance  
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¶2. (C) "ScanEagle" is an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that transmits real-time video imagery as it overflies targets. Just four feet long with a ten-foot wingspan, it is too small to be seen or heard when cruising above 3000 feet, yet from that height its camera zooms in clearly on vehicles and structures below. Its operation is basic: a ground-based 'pilot' navigates with a 'joy stick' and keyboard; and a technician launches and retrieves the craft without a runway via a device operable in a clearing on land or ship. Operating costs are low: each 40-pound craft is able to fly or loiter up to 15 hours nonstop on 5.5 liters of fuel, has a transmission range of nearly 70 miles, and can operate in heavy winds and weather. (Detailed specs are publicly available at: <http://www.insitu.com/prod/scaneagle.cfm>.)

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Job #1: Hostages and HVTs  
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¶3. (S) UAVs have proven useful before, during, and after strikes against the FARC. In the planning stage, they provide updated reconnaissance imagery of target sites previously identified by human and signals intelligence. Prior to launch, the COLAF deploys UAVs to target sites to assess weather patterns before putting bombers in the air. The UAVs then keep their cameras trained on targets to ensure

identification until planes arrive. Loitering UAVs give commanders a real-time, bird's-eye view of COLMIL assaults, enabling them to review pilots' accuracy and to provide battle damage assessments. When inserting troops at enemy sites, the COLAR uses the UAV for force protection and as a lookout in case of anti-aircraft threats to its helicopters. After strikes are over, UAVs can continue site surveillance, watching for enemy survivors and their escape routes.

¶4. (S) UAVs are better suited to 'point' or 'line' reconnaissance (pre-designated sites and structures or rivers and roads) than to broad, ad hoc, 'area' sweeps. They are meant to supplement but not substitute for humint / sigint leads. Still, opportunistic events can occur. When a UAV 'pilot' flew by chance over a truck unloading FARC fighters, and the COLAF happened to have a bomber available nearby, an aerial assault was launched within 30 minutes. Similarly, when a UAV caught two vehicles being loaded with coca, a helicopter gunship was quickly dispatched and destroyed them. Such stationary targets on open roads are good cases for UAV use, whereas targets beneath jungle canopy impenetrable to the human eye require more sophisticated platforms.

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Riverine Interdiction  
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¶5. (S) UAVs are ideal for surveillance and interdiction of drug traffic along river networks, especially in the border regions of southern and eastern Colombia and along the Pacific coast. A target can be fixed and followed downstream, to be intercepted by COLMAR 'piranha' boats. This optimizes the use of scarce riverine resources, enabling them to nab a located target rather than to lie in wait for the enemy or conduct open-ended river sweeps. In some cases the COLMAR need not expend any of its resources. When a UAV tracked a coca-loaded boat down river to a pier stop, the UAV team alerted the local town police to board the boat and search its cargo. Monitoring narco-boat movements and stopping points can also direct counterdrug forces to locations of coca caches (caletas).

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Very Useful -- If Used Well  
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¶6. (C) UAVs offer a range of potential benefits to the COLMIL:

- Reduced risk to personnel: the UAV 'pilot' controls the craft from the security of the base, with no risk of human casualty or hostage capture.
- Expanded intelligence collection: overflight capability accesses more remote areas, and stealth above 3000 feet evades enemy detection.
- Force multiplier effect: conducting surveillance with an unmanned craft frees up troops for offensive action.
- Asset optimization: low-tech 'drones' spare usage of more high-maintenance assets like helicopters or piranha boats.
- Lower mission cost: UAVs are cheap to operate, maintain, and fix compared to any other ISR platform.

¶7. (C) The COLMIL is in the process of developing joint doctrine for the use of UAVs. At present, that doctrine is in its infancy and is not yet included in the operational commanders' planning process. Moreover, Colombian operators still depend on support from Boeing coaches. U.S. training will be extended until the Colombians become capable of operating on their own. Additional training and effective implementation of UAV capabilities will expand operational and tactical intelligence exploitation opportunities, but an effective outcome will require aggressive COLMIL action.

=====CABLE ENDS=====